Glimpses of Vietnamese Classical Literature

HANOI – 1972

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VIETNAMESE CLASSICAL LITERATURE

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Chapter I

VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE AND SCRIPT

The common national language, Vietnamese or Kinh, spoken by over 80 per cent of the population, is the same throughout the country, with only regional variants which by no means hamper understanding. Owing to economic and cultural development, particularly in the North, the mountain-dwelling ethnic minorities also study and speak Kinh while keeping their own languages. All told, there are about sixty languages : Muong, Tay, Nung, Meo, Zao, Gia Rai, Ba Na, E De, Se Dang... geographically distributed in a most intricate way. As far as linguistics is concerned one can distinguish :

— the Sino-Tibetan group comprising the Tay, Nung, Thai, Meo, Han,... languages ;

— the Mon-Khmer group comprising the Se Dang, Ba Na, Khmer languages ;

— the Malayo-Polynesian group comprising the Gia Rai, E De, Cham,... languages.

To which group do the Vietnamese language and the kindred Muong language belong ? Among linguists, the question remains undecided. It should

be noted that in Viet Nam, a cross-roads where successive migrations have created a very intricate ethnic complex, contributions of various languages to the common one and borrowings of one language from another are frequent. As regards phonetics, in particular for the tones, and certain aspects of vocabulary and syntax, Vietnamese does have many common characters with languages related to Thai. But in these same aspects, in particular for the basic vocabulary, it is akin to the Mon-Khmer group. Several authors trace back all these various languages to a common group prevailing in Southeast Asia at a very remote time. Later, a differentiation took place under the influence of various historical factors, but then exchanges multiplied as history gradually evolved towards an integration of different ethnic minorities into a national community in Viet Nam.

In the North, even before the Christian era, the Thai had been put like the Lac Viet under Chinese imperial rule. Several migrations in later centuries brought them further south until they became a component of the Vietnamese nation. The Meo had settled in Viet Nam several centuries ago and had increased contacts with the Thai and the Kinh. In the South, many ethnic groups had migrated there and set up different kingdoms.

All these languages are syllabic, and the particularities which distinguish them like double consonants have either disappeared or remained as archaisms. The various syllables are rather akin from one language to another. The basic vocabularies had many common points, and throughout history the influence of the Chinese then of the Vietnamese (Kinh) languages particularly in the cultural domain

had brought these languages ever closer together. The late appearance of scripts, which would have fixed them, might also have facilitated that process.

Thus one cannot dissociate the history of the language from the general history of Viet Nam and of its people, a complex and eventful history which had bred many contacts, exchanges and also conflicts, and step by step led to the constitution of a multi-national body with a common national language and languages special to each minority group.

The biggest foreign contribution was that of classical Chinese, *Han,* which was used during the millennium of Chinese imperial rule as the official language, in administration, education, philosophy, historical and medical studies, and literary creation in cultivated circles. Hence a high proportion of *Han* words and the adoption of certain *Han* syntaxic rules. In particular, the cultural vocabulary, in Viet Nam as in other countries of Southeast Asia, has a *Han* origin, both as regards simple and compound words. While the ideograms are common, the pronunciation is different from current Chinese, so that one cannot suspect the presence of words of foreign origin when listening to a sentence with many *Han* words. *Han* has indeed become Vietnamized and thoroughly integrated into the country's language.

After the regaining of national independence, the Vietnamese monarchies which followed one another from the tenth to the end of the nineteenth century kept on using *Han* as the official language. In 1918, the colonial regime abolished the mandarin examinations carried out in *Han,* but until 1945 it was still used in the villages of North and Central Viet Nam in religious ceremonies and the writing of land-deeds.

Even while using *Han* as the official language, the Vietnamese people had devised a special script, *nom*, to transcribe their popular national language. The oldest text in *nom* still preserved dates from the fourteenth century and was written by Nguyen Thuyen, but the creation of this script and its usage should be traced back to a much earlier date. Researches are being made on its origins.

At first, the *nom* script, which was derived from the ideographic script, was little appreciated by the scholars; however, it represented a national and popular reaction in face of foreign cultural domination. Thus *nom* literature displayed a gradual development with a vigorous leap each time the national and popular movement was on the upsurge. Early in the fifteenth century, the reformer Ho Quy Ly had several Confucian classics translated into *nom* and decreed the use of *nom* in administrative papers. Towards the same period, the great statesman and poet Nguyen Trai by writing poems in *nom*, conferred on that demotic script its titles of nobility. After Nguyen Trai the greatest scholars no longer disdained to write in *nom*. *Nom* literature rapidly developed, particularly in the 18th century, and by the end of that century the great Tay Son leader Nguyen Hue decreed the compulsory use of *nom* in administration and in mandarin examinations. That was a true revolution, for the feudalists opposed the adoption of *nom* as the official language. Not only did the reactionary monarchies relegate it to the background, they also sought to ban works in *nom*, accusing them of peddling subversive ideas against their regimes. Immediately after the fall of the Tay Son, in 1802 the

Nguyen monarchy restored the use of *Han* in administration and in official literature. All their edicts, however, could not prevent literature in *nom* from vigorously developing. With Nguyen Du's *Kieu*, *nom* reached a perfection which enabled it to definitely overcome the disdain shown by scholars of previous periods.

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The introduction of a romanized script, *quoc ngu*, constituted a new stage in Viet Nam's linguistic history. Used since the 17th century by European missionaries to propagate Catholicism, it was only current in Catholic circles, which made up a tiny minority. When the French conquered Nam Bo, they step by step used it for administrative purposes, together with French. Until then, *quoc ngu* was regarded as a tool of foreign aggressors by the Vietnamese scholars and people who showed it hostility or at least indifference. But the advantages of alphabetic script over ideographic script soon became evident: learning to read it requires only a few months as against several years for the latter.

As early as the beginning of the 20th century. patriots anxious to propagate new ideas had realized that *quoc ngu* could become a most convenient tool. and the diffusion of the new script was closely linked to the development of the national movement. While the colonial regime strove to keep the population in want of knowledge, the patriots endeavoured to struggle against illiteracy and ignorance, braving frequent repressive measures by the colonial authorities.

The introduction and diffusion of the romanized script along with the development of printing gave a strong fillip to the literary movement in both content and form. It was, however, not until 1936 before the struggle against illiteracy in the framework of the colonial regime could develop, when under the direction of the Communist Party and thanks to a big popular movement a large-scale organization was created and publication of newspapers, pamphlets, books of political, historical and scientific popularization increased.

A decisive step was made with the founding of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam in 1945. For the first time in the history of the country, the national language was made the official language in administration and the vehicle language in the entire educational system. Many political, economic, historical terms so far reserved for specialists became current. The massive participation of the various strata of the population in the national struggle and the construction of socialism has contributed to the rapid diffusion of ideas and therefore of new terms. The rapid development of the teaching of science and technique has led to the creation of a considerable vocabulary comprising several tens of thousands of terms in all branches of natural and social sciences. In social sciences, the creation of a new terminology can rely on old bases as the different subjects — politics, philosophy, history — have already been treated over the past centuries. In natural sciences and techniques, one has most often to create an entirely new terminology.

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To this end, three methods can be used:

— to start from the national vocabulary to create a new term;

— to start from Chinese radicals (just as Europeans create new terms from Greek and Latin roots). This work is facilitated by the adoption of terms already created in China and Japan from these radicals;

— to adopt existing international terms, particularly in chemistry, while adapting their spelling to the peculiarities of the Vietnamese language [1].

The Democratic Republic of Viet Nam is one of the first newly-independent countries to have all subjects taught at all levels, including higher education, in the national language. The work of devising a scientific and technical terminology, writing textbooks, compiling special lexicons and other scientific works has required from scientific workers, teachers and linguists a considerable work which is still being carried on. The creation of a national scientific and technical terminology helps put an end to a state of cultural alienation common to all colonized nations compelled to use a foreign language in the field of science. It also bridges the deep gap between the intellectuals and the popular classes and enables a rapid diffusion of science and technique and the participation of the masses in technical and scientific work.

The diffusion of political, economic and philosophical works and the introduction of a scientific and technical vocabulary have greatly contributed to

1. In the colonial period, a certain number of French words were already adopted and Vietnamized. Thus la *gare* has become *nha ga*; *savon*. *xa phong*, etc.

shaping the structure of the language. In the past, the language, which most often served to express poetic feelings or themes of philosophic meditation, was of a rather synthetic tendency ; today, it tends to adopt an analytic style, clearer and more precise. It has also acquired more flexibility thanks to an enlarged vocabulary and the creation of new forms of expression.

The Viet Nam Workers' Party and the DRVN Government pay particular attention to linguistic problems. Despite US bombings, the work of creation, study and research carried out on the Vietnamese language is in full swing.

Chapter II

VIETNAMESE LITERATURE: 10th - 17th CENTURIES

The period between the 10th and 17th centuries witnessed the creation and consolidation in Viet Nam of a stable national state, with a centralized monarchical government, a national territory which gradually extended southward and an original national culture.

A short period of instability and feudal parcelling had followed the regaining of independence in the 10th century, but with the advent of the Ly in 1009 the centralized monarchical state was firmly set up. The Ly were succeeded in 1225 by the Tran dynasty which carried on this work of national unification and construction until the end of the 14th century. The struggle against the Ming invasion and occupation early in the 15th century, which ended in 1427 with the recovery of independence and the advent of the Le dynasty, opened a new stage. The Le (1428-1789) ensured national development with a stable regime during the 15th and 16th centuries; but in the 17th century, the regime began to show signs

of weakness though it was not until the following century when it was deeply shaken.

We will separately study:

— The period between the 10th and 14th centuries, which for commodity's sake we shall call the Ly-Tran period;

— The early Le period (15th-17th centuries).

1. THE LY-TRAN PERIOD
(11th-14th Centuries)

Ly – Tran Society and State

Immediately after his enthronement, the founder of the Ly dynasty moved the capital to Thang Long, on the present site of Hanoi, in the centre of a vast plain watered by the most important rivers of the country. Until the 19th century Thang Long was to remain the capital and the cultural centre of the country. The edict on the transfer of the capital (1010) is one of the oldest written documents handed down to us.

The foundation of the regime consisted in an agrarian institution comprising several sectors. In principle, the king was the owner of all lands, but in practice there were state domains, appanages and latifundia belonging to noblemen and high dignitaries, communal lands and private lands. Thus the farmers were either peasant villagers with duties toward the state, or serfs, domestic slaves in latifundia, or small land-owners.

The Ly and Tran kings and the noblemen with latifundia had dikes and canals built and new lands

reclaimed ; at the beginning of each year, in a solemn ceremony in honour of the god of agriculture, the king symbolically ploughed a plot of land to show the interest paid by the monarchy to agriculture.

With silk goods and embroidered articles exported to China, ceramics and particularly chinaware, handicrafts reached a high level. Using engraved wooden planks, printing developed with the diffusion of Buddhist and Confucian writings. By the 13th century, the capital was already divided into quarters specialized in various trades, while many villages also turned out special products sold throughout the country. Exchanges developed between the plains and the mountains and with China, Siam and Java as well.

Under the king, the high offices at the Court and the administration of provinces and regions were entrusted to members of the royal family or faithful dignitaries, but the junior functionaries were recruited through examinations. In 1242, the monarchy appointed village functionaries. As early as the 11th century, laws and regulations were gathered in a written code.

The threat hanging over the country on account of the ambitions of the Chinese imperial Court, and the Cham's incursions compelled the Vietnamese monarchy to devote especial care to the building of armed forces. Besides the royal army, the princes had their own troops, but the kings knew too well that a regular army alone could not effectively resist aggressors greatly superior in numbers (the Mongols invaded the country with 500,000 men, soldiers and carriers). Military conscription was therefore extended to the entire population ; the conscripts went

through periods of military training then returned to their villages to farm the land. In this way the whole nation was acquainted with military service and could be mobilized when necessary.

The method for national defence, as applied in the victorious struggles against the Sung in the 12th century, and especially against the Mongols in the 13th, and as expounded in the *Handbook of Military Art* by General Tran Hung Dao, who had vanquished the Mongols, was essentially based on the participation of the population in the war. The Tran kings, in particular, took the advice of village representatives before deciding to organize the resistance, and the participation of the population of both the plains and the mountains played a decisive role in the victorious struggles against foreign aggressions. Before he died, Tran Hung Dao made this recommendation to the king, "It is essential to treat the people humanely in order to strike deep roots and secure lasting support."

Buddhism and Literature

At the time of the recovery of independence, in the 10th century, local beliefs of an animistic tendency still remained strong. The world was peopled with genii ruling over natural phenomena — the wind, the waters, the mountains — who were worshipped besides great figures, outstanding pioneers or liberators of the country. The blending of these beliefs with Taoist practices coming from China gave birth to a complex Pantheon. But Taoism itself, as expounded in Lao Tze's and Chuang Tze's writings, was reserved for a minority.

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